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## XXI.—MATTHEW ARNOLD AND GOETHE

When Matthew Arnold called Goethe “the clearest, the largest, the most helpful thinker of modern times,”<sup>1</sup> he paid tribute to one of the most significant and enduring influences of his life. In him without doubt Arnold found one of those few best things that he held it the critic’s function to know and to make known. Yet it was not as a poet, even though he never failed to accord to Goethe the first place after Shakespeare, that he hailed him as the greatest of the moderns, but as the thinker who more than any other had achieved the great task of modern literature, the task of interpreting the modern world to itself.

“People joke about and take fright at the problems of life; few trouble themselves about the words that would solve them;”<sup>2</sup> so Goethe once wrote to Schiller. Matthew Arnold was preëminently one of the few. His special business was the criticism of literature, but he brought to it the indispensable profound and persistent reflection upon the world which literature is designed to interpret. So he came to his famous campaign to quicken intellectually and spiritually the lives of his people. To that end he drew the main lines of his program, the endeavor to foster and disseminate the critical spirit (which he made the basis of what he called the modern element), the gospel of culture, and the setting up of that ideal of literature that he found most perfectly realized in the classics.

“The wise,” said Æschylus long ago, “have much in common with the wise,” and he might have added, “because they go to the wise.” Arnold’s first critical essay,

<sup>1</sup> *Mixed Essays*, “A French Critic on Goethe.”

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, Trans. by L. Dora Schmitz, London, 1877, II, 385.

the brilliant preface of 1853, goes to Goethe six times, for anything from one of those profoundly apt terms with which Goethe's critical arsenal is so abundantly stored to authority for an estimate of his age. In almost the first of his published letters he tells his mother of returning to Goethe's life with higher esteem than ever.<sup>3</sup> Nearly thirty years later he writes to his sister: "Considering how much I have read of Goethe, I have said in my life very little about him."<sup>4</sup> But to anyone who has noted the number and the variety of the allusions to Goethe in Arnold's letters, in his notebooks, in his essays, even in his poetry, that little seems generous. And it is significant. Much of it, to be sure, is casual, one might almost say conventional: "the greatest poet of the modern world, the manifest centre of German literature," and so on; much of it is personal, as when in that oft-recurring depression over the stifling press of his everyday affairs he thinks of Goethe's busy life,<sup>5</sup> or when against what he calls the dæmonic element (he borrows the term from Goethe) he braces himself with Goethe's resolve "to keep pushing on one's posts into the darkness";<sup>6</sup> much of it is merely the treasuring up of his own thought bettered by the fit word of the master, like Goethe's epithet for the Bible which he quotes so effectively in *Culture and Anarchy*, "the Bible, the Book of the Nations."<sup>7</sup> But very much goes to the centre of Arnold's own problem, as for instance that characterization of Heine as the successor of Goethe in Goethe's most important line of activity, "his line of activity as a soldier in the war of liberation of humanity,"<sup>8</sup> or that mighty sentence: "Goethe is the greatest poet of modern times, not because he is one of the half-

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew Arnold's Letters*, New York, 1895, I, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 165.      <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 43.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 249.

<sup>7</sup> *Culture and Anarchy*, "Preface."

<sup>8</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, II, "Heine."

dozen human beings who in the history of our race have shown the most signal gift for poetry, but because having a very considerable gift for poetry, he was at the same time, in the width, depth, and richness of his criticism of life, by far our greatest modern man.”<sup>9</sup>

Now the first essential of a modern thinker, as Matthew Arnold defines it in his *Essay on the Modern Element*, is the critical spirit, which endeavors, to quote his words in the *Essay on Translating Homer*, “in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science,—to see the object as in itself it really is.” That was the starting point of Arnold’s own work in criticism, as he later develops his ideas in *Sweetness and Light*, the starting-point of his handling of culture. The very words in which he expressed the ideal of the critical spirit are an almost literal translation of one of Goethe’s so-called maxims: “The truly wise ask what the thing is in itself.” But the important point is that Arnold himself says that he found the fullest realization of this ideal in the modern world in Goethe.

The general conception, surprisingly often with the very accent which Matthew Arnold was later to apply, pervades all of Goethe’s work. We know why Arnold said: “Goethe’s profound, imperturbable naturalism is absolutely fatal to all routine thinking,”<sup>10</sup> when we read toward the end of *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*:

In the study of the sciences, particularly those that deal with nature, it is as necessary as it is difficult to inquire whether that which has been handed down to us from the past, and regarded as valid by our ancestors, is really to be relied on to such a degree that we may continue to build upon it safely in the future.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Mixed Essays*, “A French Critic on Goethe.”

<sup>10</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, I, “Heine.”

<sup>11</sup> *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*, Trans. and ed. by Edward Bell, London, 1882, 419 (not included in edition which Carlyle translated).

But Goethe's skepticism was very much like Arnold's, not a wholesale, iconoclastic scepticism; rather what he happily styled an "active scepticism," one "which constantly aims at overcoming itself,"<sup>12</sup> for as the Chancellor von Müller (whose work Arnold especially recommended for the insight it gives us into Goethe's character) said: "It was an absolute want of his nature to gain a clear conception of every subject however heterogeneous,"<sup>13</sup> or as Goethe himself wrote to Schiller: "I am never able to keep myself in a purely speculative mood, but have immediately to try and form a distinct conception."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he consistently in word and act lives up to his own maxim: "In art and knowledge, as also in deed and action, everything depends on a pure apprehension of the object and a treatment of it according to its nature."<sup>15</sup> So Arnold made seeing "the thing as in itself it really is" the key to the mastery of the modern world.

Arnold's warning as to the vitiating influence of personal, party, or even patriotic prejudice upon seeing the "thing in itself" is too well known to need comment here; one word will suffice: "Disinterestedness."<sup>16</sup> On a similar occasion Goethe brought forward a model of the way, as he said, "in which a man should both observe the world and relate what he had seen without mixing up himself with it."<sup>17</sup> But of all he ever said on that subject the most illuminating is that passage in *Truth and Poetry* in

<sup>12</sup> *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, Trans. by Baily Saunders, London, 1906, 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Characteristics of Goethe from the German of Falk, von Müller, etc.*, by Sarah Austin, London, 1833, II, 310.

<sup>14</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, II, 402.

<sup>15</sup> *Maxims*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, I, "The Function of Criticism."

<sup>17</sup> *The Auto-Biography of Goethe*, Trans. by the Rev. A. J. W. Morrison, London, 1868, II, 54.

which he tells of the freedom that Spinoza's *Ethics* opened to him: "But what especially riveted me to him, was the utter disinterestedness which shone forth in his every sentence. That wonderful sentiment, 'He who truly loves God must not desire God to love him in return . . .' filled my whole mind. To be disinterested in everything, but the most of all in love and friendship, was my highest desire, my maxim, my practise, so that that subsequent hasty saying of mine, 'If I love thee what is that to thee?' was spoken right out of my heart."<sup>18</sup> That passage deeply impressed Arnold, if we may judge from his analysis<sup>19</sup> of the source of Goethe's profound admiration for Spinoza. He found it in Spinoza's denial of final causes, in his active stoicism, in what he and Goethe more imaginatively called "disinterestedness."

But, like Arnold, Goethe did not rest with the external world. He carried the critical spirit into the world of self. He talked more about himself than did Arnold; he regarded the self as an intellectual problem more than do most of us. Where Arnold would have striven for "self-mastery," Goethe sought "self-knowledge." He stressed the necessity of self-knowledge for knowledge of other people,<sup>20</sup> for intelligent conduct,<sup>21</sup> for the quest of perfection;<sup>22</sup> but his most significant utterance in view of Matthew Arnold's stress on the relations between moral and literary power is what he told Eckermann of Byron: "If he had but known how to endure moral restraint! That he could not was his ruin; and it may be aptly said that he

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, I, "Spinoza and the Bible."

<sup>20</sup> *Criticisms, Reflections, and Maxims of Goethe*, Trans. by W. B. Röunfeldt (The Camelot Series), "Shakespeare and No End."

<sup>21</sup> *Maxims*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

was destroyed by his own unbridled temperament. But he was too much in the dark about himself.”<sup>23</sup> Goethe held that in the self as in all things, “That which we do not understand, we do not possess.”<sup>24</sup>

But Goethe did not end with the individual thing in isolation on his critical slide. As he once told Schiller, he was wont to associate every new discovery with the mass of what he already knew, and thus each fact acquired genuine significance.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Eckhel, who, if we may believe what Goethe told his friend, was one of those happy persons who have not even a notion that there is such a thing as a philosophy of nature,<sup>26</sup> Goethe was constantly seeking the principles and laws, constantly seeking to comprehend not only the thing in itself but the whole of which it is a part. So he was grateful to Schiller for taking him beyond himself,<sup>27</sup> but as he declared unmistakably in a speech of Leonardo in *Wilhelm Meister*, he believed that man must seek consistency, the essence of law and principle, not in his surroundings but within himself.<sup>28</sup>

In literature, like Arnold, he stressed the importance to the poet of what in conversation with Eckermann he called “the sight of life on a large scale.”<sup>29</sup> Of Shakespeare he says: “The poet lived in noble and momentous times, and he has represented their development, nay even their misdevelopment, to us with the utmost serenity. Nor would

<sup>23</sup> *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, Trans. by John Oxenford, London, 1874, 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Criticisms*, 158.

<sup>25</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, I, 373.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 438.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 195.

<sup>28</sup> *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, II, 320.

<sup>29</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 171.

he have exercised so powerful an influence upon us, had he not made himself master of his own living times," or more tersely, from this point of view: "And if we call Shakespeare one of the greatest poets that have ever lived, we mean to imply that scarcely any one has viewed the world as clearly as he viewed it."<sup>30</sup> So Arnold said of Sophocles: "He saw life steadily, and saw it whole,"<sup>31</sup> and of Goethe himself praised the wide and luminous view.<sup>32</sup>

In these three respects then, in the constructive challenge of all that had come down to us on the acceptance of the past, in the emphasis upon seeing the thing in itself, or disinterestedness, in the effort to see life "whole," Arnold was for his analysis of the critical spirit heavily indebted to Goethe.

But the critical spirit is only the beginning of the deliverance which, Arnold says, more than any other modern Goethe achieved. In other words, if the beginning of the modern man's effort be seeing the thing in itself, the goal is harmonious perfection, and the way is culture. That is the word with which Arnold's name is, I suppose, most generally associated, and it is, one might almost say, the favorite word of Goethe. It comes into his utterances on every conceivable occasion, sometimes in the very forefront of the discussion, more often casually, almost unperceived. It is the key to his life. "How could I," he cries when he is censured for lack of patriotic hatred of the French, "how could I, *to whom* culture and barbarism are alone of importance, hate a nation which is among the most cultivated of the earth?"<sup>33</sup> He is always thinking

<sup>30</sup> *Criticisms*, "Shakespeare and No End."

<sup>31</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, III, "On the Modern Element in Literature."

<sup>32</sup> *Poems*, London, 1894, II, 225.

<sup>33</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 457.

of culture, of widening and of improving his attainments and abilities; even on that long anticipated and long deferred holiday in Rome, in the midst of his rejoicing over the realization of his dream, he sharply reminds himself: "I am not here to enjoy myself after my own fashion, but to busy myself with the great objects around, to learn and to improve myself ere I am forty years old,"<sup>34</sup> and when he was almost a decade beyond the mark he had set, he wrote to Schiller: "Would to God that I could begin again at the beginning and leave all my works behind me like the down-trodden shoes of children, and produce something better."<sup>35</sup> That passion for improvement is doubtless the source of that versatility that yet stands almost without peer in modern Europe, undoubtedly one of the chief reasons for the influence he exerted upon Matthew Arnold's "profoundly aspiring nature." In moral culture Goethe never, I think, approached Arnold, but he expressed Arnold's aim more powerfully than ever he did: "To labor for his own moral culture is the simplest and most practicable thing which man can propose to himself;"<sup>36</sup> or "Perfection is the measure of heaven, and the wish to be perfect the measure of man;"<sup>37</sup> while Arnold, although in breadth his activity, I need hardly say, is not to be compared with Goethe's, certainly summed up Goethe's ideal when he explained the aim of culture: "It is in making endless additions to itself, in the endless expansion of its powers, in endless growth in wisdom and beauty, that the spirit of the human race finds its ideal."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Goethe's Travels in Italy*, Trans. from the German, London, 1883, 123.

<sup>35</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, II, 61.

<sup>36</sup> *Auto-Biography*, II, 74.

<sup>37</sup> *Maxims*, 134.

<sup>38</sup> *Culture and Anarchy*, "Sweetness and Light."

It was in this respect perhaps more than in any other that Goethe was able to fulfill his mission for the Europe that, as Matthew Arnold said, had lost her basis of spiritual life—"to interpret human life afresh, and to supply a new spiritual basis to it,"<sup>39</sup> and it was in this way perhaps more than in any other that Goethe was helpful to Matthew Arnold when he began his battle against philistinism. Goethe spoke of culture far more than Arnold, perhaps because the general state of society in Germany made inevitable a degree of consciousness on that point that in the Englishman of fifty years later would have been considered amusing. In art and in science he attained to a breadth of culture that Arnold wanted. But he wrote no book on culture; although he spoke and wrote constantly of his efforts at self-cultivation, he did not definitely articulate a program so compact or so profound as Arnold's.

Yet Arnold found already worked out discursively in Goethe the salient aspects of his conception. Whatever Goethe's practice, there can be no doubt that the philosophy which underlay his conception of culture was very similar in its insistence upon man's moral independence and responsibility to the philosophy that inspired the "conquering of the obvious faults of our animality"<sup>40</sup> that Arnold presupposed for his superstructure of culture. It is Goethe himself who speaks from the lips of the stranger in the first book of *Wilhelm Meister*: "The fabric of our life is formed of necessity and chance; the reason of man takes its station between them, and may rule them both: it treats the necessary as the groundwork of its being; the accidental it can direct and guide and employ for its own

<sup>39</sup> *The Study of Celtic Literature*, ed. by Alfred Nutt, London, 1910, 143.

<sup>40</sup> *Culture and Anarchy*, "Sweetness and Light."

purposes; and only while this principle of reason stands firm and inexpugnable does man deserve to be named the god of this lower world.”<sup>41</sup> Still more impressively he went to the very heart of the matter in a sentence which Matthew Arnold copied into his notebook: “The main thing is that man learn to be master of himself,”<sup>42</sup> and in the question which Wilhelm asked Werner: “What good were it for me to manufacture perfect iron, while my own breast is full of dross?”<sup>43</sup>

In Goethe Arnold also found the rudiments of his conception of harmonious perfection—for instance in that passage of the nineteenth book of *Truth and Poetry* in which he tells how in moments of ennui after his first great burst of poetic activity he wondered, as he says, “whether it would not be my wisest course to employ . . . for my own and others’ profit and advantage, the human, rational, and intellectual part of my being, and so, as I already had done . . . devote the intervals when nature ceased to influence me to worldly occupations, and thus to leave no one of my faculties unused.”<sup>44</sup> It is not, I think, unreasonable to suppose that we have the fruits of that thinking in Wilhelm Meister’s analysis of the harmonious cultivation for which he yearns, yet which he fears is hardly available to the burgher, who, as he says, “must cultivate some single gifts in order to be useful, and it is beforehand settled, that in his manner of existence there is no harmony, and can be none, since he is bound to make himself of use in one department, and so has to relinquish

<sup>41</sup> *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship and Travels*, Trans. by Thomas Carlyle, London, 1858, I, 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Matthew Arnold’s Notebooks*, ed. by the Hon. Mrs. Wodehouse, London, 1903, 24.

<sup>43</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, I, 235.

<sup>44</sup> *Autobiography*, II, 68.

all the others.”<sup>45</sup> And again (this time it is from the lips of Lothario that the author speaks): “It is inconceivable how much a man of true culture can accomplish for himself and others.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, Goethe and Schiller, as we may see from their exchange of comments on their periodical, *Die Horen*, and the famous “little fellows” of the “Xenienkampf,” felt that they were the central rallying-point for all lovers of culture in Germany.<sup>47</sup> Were it not for their life-long foes, the Philistines, they would undoubtedly have realized Lothario’s project of a league of culture. For Goethe believed, as Arnold was quick to note in his comments on both Goethe and Byron, that “if a great talent is to be speedily and happily developed, the great point is that a great deal of intellect and sound culture should be current in a nation.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, he declared more than once what Matthew Arnold was to say later, that the greatness of Greek literature was due no less to the culture of the age than to the genius of the writers.<sup>49</sup> Goethe had at bottom, for all his “universal benevolence,” very little of Arnold’s nineteenth century humanitarianism, but he believed that in his work for culture, personal as it was for the most part, he had performed a national service, not only on the ground that the individual’s work for his own culture is ultimately the important thing,<sup>50</sup> but that the most patriotic thing one could do was not to hate the French, but “according to his talents, according to his tendencies, [to] do his utmost to increase the culture and development

<sup>45</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, I, 236.

<sup>46</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, II, 146.

<sup>47</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, II, 479.

<sup>48</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 254.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

*of the people*, to strengthen and widen it on all sides, that the people may not lag behind other peoples, but may become competent for every great action when the day of its glories arrives.”<sup>51</sup>

So in these four particulars, in the ideal of culture, in the moral basis of culture, in the emphasis upon harmonious perfection as the centre of culture, in the insistence that labor for culture is the greatest service to one's people, did Arnold, as in his analysis of the critical spirit that is the starting point of culture, find the rudiments of his ideas already worked out in Goethe.

For both men the most powerful agent of this culture is art, particularly literature. In *Literature and Dogma* Arnold quoted with approval Goethe's saying: “He who has art and science has also religion.”<sup>52</sup> Obviously this is no holiday “art for art's sake,” but a serious art; for Schiller and Goethe, as Lewes declares, “were both profoundly convinced that Art was no luxury of leisure, no mere amusement to charm the idle, or relax the care-worn; but a mighty influence, serious in its aims, although pleasurable in its means. . . . They believed that Culture would raise Humanity to its full powers; and they, as artists, knew no Culture equal to that of Art.”<sup>53</sup> For Goethe has much to say of the seriousness of art. “Poetry should be instructive,” he writes to Zelter, “but imperceptibly so;”<sup>54</sup> “Art rests upon a kind of religious sense; it is deeply and ineradicably in earnest.”<sup>55</sup> Such a view of art is inevitably disastrous to excessive critical toler-

<sup>51</sup> *Life of Goethe*, G. H. Lewes, London, 1890 (quoted Luden's *Rückblicke in Mein Leben*, 113), 520.

<sup>52</sup> *Literature and Dogma*, New York, 1877, 461.

<sup>53</sup> *Life of Goethe*, 387.

<sup>54</sup> *Goethe's Letters to Zelter*, selected and trans. by A. D. Coleridge, London, 1887, 252.

<sup>55</sup> *Maxims*, 174.

ance, particularly when the critic becomes responsible for the direction of effort of less experienced artists. It is not surprising therefore that Goethe in the rôle of director, as in the conversations with Eckermann and the discussions of *Wilhelm Meister*, becomes exclusive. "In poetry, only the really great and pure advances us;"<sup>56</sup> so Eckermann reports his master, and "the truly great," as the eloquent Odoard in *Wilhelm Meister* explains, "raises us above ourselves, and shines before us like a star."<sup>57</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, perhaps in reminiscence of Goethe's own auto-da-fés, goes farther: "Either a poem is excellent, or it should not be allowed to exist."<sup>58</sup> True, that is more heroic than his usual practice, but he habitually felt what he once put into the mouth of the Marchese in *Wilhelm Meister* that if the author "observe that the world is very easy to be satisfied, requiring but a slight, pleasing, transitory show; it were matter of surprise if indolence and selfishness did not keep him fixed at mediocrity."<sup>59</sup> "Higher aims," as he once said, "are in themselves more valuable even if unfulfilled, than lower ones quite attained."<sup>60</sup> So in his famous three questions, after he asks, "What has the Author undertaken to do?" he goes on to ask of that purpose, "Is it reasonable and judicious?" Perhaps his most extended utterance on the subject is what he told Eckermann: "Taste is only to be educated by contemplation, not of the tolerably good, but of the truly excellent. I, therefore, show you only the best works; and when you are grounded in these, you will have a standard for the rest, which you will know how to

<sup>56</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 522.

<sup>57</sup> *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* (Bell trans.), 387.

<sup>58</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, I, 68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 119.

<sup>60</sup> *Maxims*, 175.

value, without overrating them.”<sup>61</sup> There is Matthew Arnold’s famous work for standards in essence.

But that is all very well; just what is Goethe’s idea of the best? His fundamental conception is very much like Aristotle’s: “The highest problem of any art is to produce by appearance the illusion of a higher reality.”<sup>62</sup> It must be clear,<sup>63</sup> it must subordinate individual “singularity” to the interest of life as a whole;<sup>64</sup> it must be normal;<sup>65</sup> it must handle simply a worthy subject;<sup>66</sup> it must bear the mark of art’s indispensable relation to mankind<sup>67</sup>—as Goethe said of Shakespeare’s art, it will make “mankind familiar with itself.”<sup>68</sup> Even in its beauty it will be restrained, for as Goethe asserted in his essay *On the Laocoön*: “When the artist is able to master his sense of beauty and to infuse it into simple objects, the same will shine forth in its highest force and dignity if it manifests its strength in the production of manifold characters and knows how to moderate and restrain, in the imitations of art, the passionate outbursts of human nature.”<sup>69</sup>

Probably Goethe’s most actively centralized exposition of his ideal of the best is his answer to his own question in the essay on *Literary Sansculottism*: “When and where does a classical author appear in a nation? When, in the history of his nation, he meets with great events and their consequences, together making for a propitious and significant unity; when he discerns breadth in the opinions of his countrymen, depth in their feelings, and force and

<sup>61</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 67.

<sup>62</sup> *Autobiography*, I, 422.

<sup>63</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, I, 307.

<sup>64</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*, II, 251.

<sup>65</sup> *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, I, 379.

<sup>66</sup> *Autobiography*, I, 237.

<sup>67</sup> *Maxims*, 175.

<sup>68</sup> *Criticisms*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

consistency in their actions; when he, himself penetrated by the national spirit, feels that his innate genius renders him capable of sympathizing with the past as with the present; when he finds his nation placed upon a high level of culture, so that his own development is rendered easy for him; when he sees before him a large collection of materials in the shape of the perfect or imperfect efforts of his predecessors, and when so many external and internal circumstances coincide, that he has no need to pay heavily for his experience, and is enabled, in the best years of his life, to comprehend some great work, to undertake it and carry it out in the proper order, and to execute it with a single and lofty purpose.”<sup>70</sup> There we have one of the most significant conceptions of Arnold’s essay on the *Modern Element*, a great work of art adequately expressing a culminating epoch.

We all know where Arnold found the realization of that ideal. Where did Goethe find it? Certainly not in the literature he saw springing up around him in the new century, not in the work of the realists, for Goethe believed that there is “an unlovely, a dissonant principle in nature, with which poetry ought not to meddle; with which it cannot reconcile itself, let the handling of the matter be never so exquisite,”<sup>71</sup> not in what in a letter to Zelter he called “the French literature of despair,”<sup>72</sup> not in the “self-knowledge of our modern hypochondrists, humorists and self-tormentors,”<sup>73</sup> not in Victor Hugo, who, though he had a fine talent, so Goethe told Eckermann, was “quite entangled in the unhappy romantic tendency of his time, by which he is seduced to represent, together with what is

<sup>70</sup> *Criticisms*, 113.

<sup>71</sup> *Characteristics of Goethe*, II, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Goethe's Letters to Zelter*, 453.

<sup>73</sup> *Maxims*, 161.

beautiful, also that which is most insupportable and hideous.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, I think the revolt against the extremes of Romanticism, whether we find it in Arnold, or in Sainte-Beuve, or in Mr. Irving Babbitt, may be in one aspect at least traced to Goethe. The impression this aspect of Goethe’s criticism of letters and of life made on Arnold may be gauged by the sentence Arnold culled from Joubert and presented as worthy of Goethe: “With the fever of the senses, the delirium of the passions, the weakness of the spirit; with the storms of the passing time and with the great scourges of human life,—hunger, thirst, dishonor, diseases and death,—authors may as long as they like go on making novels which shall harrow our hearts; but the soul says all the while, ‘You hurt me.’”<sup>75</sup>

It was not to the modern but to the ancient world that Goethe, like Arnold, sent the man who wished to learn what great literature is. As he said, “To the several perversities of the day a man should always oppose only the great masses of universal history.”<sup>76</sup> So “most modern productions are romantic, not because they are new, but because they are weak, morbid, and sickly; and the antique is classic, not because it is old, but because it is strong, fresh, joyous, and healthy.”<sup>77</sup> So he advised Eckermann: “One should not study contemporaries and competitors, but the great men of antiquity, whose works have, for centuries, received equal homage and consideration. . . . Let us study Moliére, let us study Shakespeare, but above all things, the old Greeks, and always the Greeks.”<sup>78</sup> And in another context he once said: “Of all peoples, the

<sup>74</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 556.

<sup>75</sup> *Essays in Criticism*, II, “Joubert.”

<sup>76</sup> *Maxims*, 113.

<sup>77</sup> *Conversations with Eckermann*, 386.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

Greeks have dreamt the dream of life the best."<sup>79</sup> Of the Greeks he writes everywhere with unfailing enthusiasm, for he found that: "In the presence of antiquity the mind that is susceptible to art and poetry feels itself placed in the most pleasing ideal state of nature, and even to this day the Homeric hymns have the power of freeing us, at any rate, for moments, from the frightful burden which the tradition of several thousand years has rolled upon us."<sup>80</sup> In this respect more than in any other did Goethe reveal his passion for the lasting: "The fashion of this world passeth away; and I would fain occupy myself only with the abiding."<sup>81</sup> That is the Goethe with whom Matthew Arnold would end.

So in these three things: in the principle that all literary effort should be directed and judged by the standard of the excellent, in the conception of that excellent, in the teaching that that ideal was best to be found in the masterpieces of classical antiquity, Arnold found his literary program in Goethe.

In view of Arnold's wide and varied reading, and intimate contact with many currents of influence, to say nothing of his creative powers, it would be absurd to say that he owed all his critical and cultural program to Goethe. But, since Arnold so consistently regarded Goethe as the modern thinker who had best handled what we may call the "modern problem"; since the adequate handling of the modern problem was the objective of all Arnold's critical writings; since in those writings Goethe was the modern authority to whom the author appealed most frequently; since Goethe had already marked out the main lines

<sup>79</sup> *Maxims*, 99.

<sup>80</sup> *Maxims*, 162.

<sup>81</sup> *Mixed Essays*, "A French Critic on Goethe."

of Arnold's program, it is just to say that with respect to the critical spirit, to the ideal of culture, to the principle that all art should be judged and directed by the standard of the excellent, to the belief that that excellent is best found in the literature of antiquity, principles controlling all his work, Matthew Arnold owed the general direction and setting up of his ideas to Goethe.

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